Seeing You Study Guide

Seeing You by Jean Valentine

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Introduction

Jean Valentine's □Seeing You□ was first published in the 1990 January/February issue of *American Poetry Review*. Subsequently, the poem was included in Valentine's 1992 collection of poetry called *The River at Wolf* and then republished in the collection *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965- 2003* (2004).

Valentine often writes about her mother and her lovers. □Seeing You□ combines these two subjects in an effort to show that the experience of getting to know one's mother and the intimacy of that relationship are similar to the experience of one's relationship with a lover. In particular, revelations of understanding□of truly □seeing□ the mother or lover physically and emotionally□are much the same astounding turning points in life.

Valentine discusses in this poem a child's dependency on its mother for life and nurture as well as the realization that, despite her love, the mother has fears arising from the challenges of parenting. The resulting appreciation of the commitment of the mother deepens the relationship and brings joy to the child. There is also joy in falling in love, in getting to know another person who is absolutely a glorious wonder. As Valentine expresses in □Seeing You,□ when one is in love, one wants to know everything there is to know about the other person, and so the impulse is to plunge into getting to know the beloved, much as one plunges into a lake and is immersed. The revelations are many, including the experience of ultimate intimacy, of seeing each other unclothed, literally and emotionally. □Seeing You□ is a poem about that moment of revelation and realization that brings tremendous growth and happiness in a loving relationship.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1934

Born in Chicago, Illinois, on April 27, 1934, to Jean Purcell and John W. Valentine, Jean Valentine went to Milton Academy from 1949 to 1952 and then received a bachelor's degree from Radcliffe College (of Harvard University) in 1956. Valentine has lived most of her life in New York City, teaching at Sarah Lawrence College, the Graduate Writing Program of New York University, Columbia University, and the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan. She has also taught many poetry workshops at various universities. Valentine married James Chace in 1957. They had two daughters, Sarah and Rebecca, but were divorced in 1968. For nearly eight years, from 1989 to 1996, Valentine lived in Ireland with Barrie Cooke, an English painter, but returned to the United States when that relationship dissolved. Some of her poetry, however, reflects her time in Ireland.

There was also a period from 1982 to 1987 when Valentine did not write at all because of alcoholism. She had stopped drinking at age forty-seven in 1981, but she suffered so much from the trauma of withdrawal that she could not write. She entered a recovery program in 1985 and eventually found that writing again helped her to regain her life. A Catholic convert, Valentine also made progress in her recovery through the effects of her volunteer work for her church during that time. Her religious affiliation is on again, off again, however. Valentine is also attracted to Buddhism.

Valentine's poetry has evolved through slightly different themes and techniques over the years, but she is best known for a dreamlike quality in poems that describe real life with passionate and intimate images. This combination of the invisible and the visible, the personal yet secretive, often makes her poetry difficult to understand. Consequently, her audience, which includes many contemporary poets, is small but astute in its appreciation of her use of language and syntax, which allows her narrator to pass from one image to another as if in a dream.

□Seeing You□ is a poem that Valentine originally published in *American Poetry Review* in early 1990 and then in her collection of poetry called *The River at Wolf* in 1992. This poem appears again in the collection that won the 2004 National Book Award for Poetry, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965-2003*, a volume that contains all her poetry from other books as well as seventy previously unpublished poems. Among Valentine's awards are the Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1965 for her first book, *Dream Barker and Other Poems*, a National Endowment for the Arts Grant (1972), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1976), and awards from the Bunting Institute, the Rockefeller Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Teasdale Poetry Prize, and the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Memorial Award (2000). Her other books include *Pilgrims* (1969), *Ordinary Things* (1974), *The Messenger* (1979), *Home Deep Blue: New and Selected Poems* (1989), *The Under Voice: Selected Poems* (1995), *Growing Darkness, Growing Light* (1997), *The Cradle of*

the Real Life (2000), and *The Lighthouse Keeper: Essays on the Poetry of Eleanor Ross Taylor* (2001).

Plot Summary

Mother

In this first section of the two-section poem, the narrator, "I," describes being born as coming out from under a mudbank and being given a boat. The care provided by the mother is compared to being given a home in the mother's hand, but the hand is empty. Perhaps the hand is empty because, ultimately, all a parent can do is give a child life; after that, even with the parent's guiding hand, the child is on its own to make something of that life. The idea behind the further description of the hand as being made of four stars, like a kite, is perhaps that of the future. A child has its mother's protection when held in her hand, but that safe place cannot last forever. The child must fly out of the nest of its mother's hand, perhaps clinging to a kite, but the future could be as bright as the four stars that give structure to the kite.

The narrator's tone throughout the poem is one of wonder and awe. By the fourth stanza, the child can sense the mother's fears and trepidations as palpably as the child is able to lick the fear from between the fingers of the mother's cradling hand. The fear is everywhere. This fear is enough to frighten the child into wanting to die, but the mother's role is to encourage and inspire, so sparks arise out of the river, symbolizing the mother, upon which the child's boat has been afloat. These sparks reflect the brilliance of the mother's love as well as her fear, but with her love dominating, and the child is able to truly see the mother in this light.

Lover

The second part of "Seeing You" starts by repeating the third stanza from the first part of the poem, about the mother. The two parts are linked through similar descriptions of the mother and the lover. The lover's hand, like the mother's, will also be empty at first, but there is a future in what the relationship will bring. The narrator feels blessed to have found love. This time, instead of seeing the emotion in the finger spaces, the narrator shares emotion by intertwining fingers with the lover. The child looks at the mother as the authority figure, but the narrator and the lover look at each other, drinking each other in, as they try to learn as much as they can about each other.

The narrator continues the imagery of water by comparing the experience of immersing oneself in the lover to that of diving into a lake. The mother was a river, but the lover is a lake, and there are the same emotions of fear and love. Once again, the narrator notices the fear first, the fear of what the future holds with this person, the fear of losing identity when giving so much of oneself to another, the fear of all the changes and new experiences that come with a romantic relationship. However, once again, the narrator gets past the fear to find the love. The brilliance here is not seen as sparks rising from the river but is seen instead at the bottom of the lake. Emerging from the plunge into the soul of the lover, the narrator finds an illuminating light. With this light, the narrator is

able to see the lover, in all his maleness, and the new world of experience that being with him will bring. His garden is one of abundance, with many fruits to taste.

Themes

Repeated Patterns

□Seeing You□ is about repeated patterns in relationships. In particular, Valentine wants to suggest that what is learned from one's first teachers, one's parents, is something one will learn again with a lover. Often in her poetry, Valentine seems to evaluate her romantic loves according to the standard of maternal love. Correspondingly, she finds similarities between the way she feels about a lover and the way she feels about her mother. Will one find subsequent gardens to be the same as the □original garden,□ or will there be different landscaping? Will other gardens be as akin to Eden as was the garden of her mother? Will the feeling of coming out of her mother's mudbank be the same as emerging from the lake of her lover? Valentine's narrator is seeking reassurance that her man's love will be as caring as her mother's love at the same time that she is reveling in the added dimensions of the new experience. There are also questions about dependency and independence. A child is dependent on its mother but must eventually strike out on his or her own. In a romantic relationship, there is an emotional dependence that must be balanced with staying true to oneself.

To symbolize these relationship patterns, Valentine creates patterns in the words and structure of the poem. There is, of course, significance in the words that are chosen for repetition: fear, love, brilliance, and gardens. Perhaps they are the four stars. They definitely form the skeleton upon which the poem is fleshed out. Repetition also occurs in the whole structure of the poem. Each verse is only two lines. Stanza 3 of the first part is repeated as stanza 1 of the second part. The two subjects, the mother and the lover, are each described with water imagery, with the mother as a river and the lover as a lake. With each person, there is a garden and a moment of revelation when the narrator feels that she is finally really □seeing□ the other person in the sense of understanding the other.

Fear and Love

Fear and love are not separate themes in □Seeing You.□ The theme is the relationship of fear and love. Valentine first homes in on the fears that the mother has, the kind of fears that every mother has about the challenges of child rearing. Across her works, one of Valentine's themes is departure, but usually in the negative sense of divorce or death. In □Seeing You,□ the departure of the child from the mother's womb is a natural occurrence, although it is a fearful experience for the mother, who suffers great pain in childbirth, and a fearful experience for the child, who must leave the protective, cozy atmosphere of the womb for the cold, cruel world. Mother and child fear separation, psychological as well as physical, throughout their lifetimes but also fear the loss of individual identity. The child must develop an identity of his or her own, and the mother must maintain her own identity as a person other than just □Mom.□ For the mother, this identity struggle is one of the fears that comes from the enormous responsibility of

parenting. However, uppermost are the concerns about caring for the child, providing food, clothing, shelter, a good education, a good example, a healthy environment, and so on. Valentine, the mother of two, emphasizes the extent of a mother's fear by repeating the word □afraid□ four times. These anxieties can be relayed to a sensitive child, who may respond with such distress that she □want[s] to die.□ Perhaps the child feels that her death will relieve the mother of her burden. However, □out of the river□ of the mother, □sparks rose up□ to give the child encouragement and confirm that love will conquer the fears. The darkness of fear is contrasted to the □brilliance□ of the light from the mother's love.

With regard to the lover, fear comes first as the narrator plunges into the relationship, but then, under the fear, the narrator reaches love. The message is that one has to get past one's fears to be able to find love. The fear starts with the awkwardness of a first date and leads to many questions: Will he like me? Will he break my heart? Will this last forever? Taking the first steps into a romantic relationship is quite frightening when one does not know where it will all end or what one will find out about the other. The narrator dives to the very core of the other person, as if going down to the core of the earth. At the bottom is the brilliance, the light of the true self of the lover, and there is then the trust that is essential to the success of the relationship. Once this epiphany of love and trust has occurred, the narrator can commit completely to her lover, physically and emotionally.

Style

Free Verse and Repetition

Using short, usually irregular line lengths and a controlled rhythm, free verse lacks the regular stress pattern, metric feet, and rhyme of traditional verse. Instead of a recurrent beat, the rhythmic effect depends on repetition, balance, and variation of phrases. A poet using free verse may suspend ordinary syntax and increase the control of pace, pauses, and timing. Poets noted for their use of free verse are Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and e. e. cummings, among many others. In □Seeing You,□ Valentine uses irregular line lengths and a controlled rhythm, sometimes unexpectedly stopping the reader once or twice in a line (□Brilliance, at the bottom. Trust you□), while at other times racing through a line, omitting punctuation in places where prose would demand punctuation (□I dove down my mental lake fear and love□). Repetition is the most obvious tool, with stanza 3 of the first section being identical to stanza 1 of the second; the repetition of the phrases □finger-spaces□ and □seeing you□; and the repetition of the words □brilliance,□ □garden,□ □fear,□ and □love.□ In addition, the first part, □Mother,□ has seven two-line stanzas, and the second, □Lover,□ has seven two-line stanzas.

Imagery

The major feature of Valentine's poetry is imagery, vividly yet simply presented in a moment of intensity. In the first line, □mudbank,□ a bank of mud that is fully or partially submerged along a river, is the image Valentine uses to represent her mother's womb. Many of Valentine's poems are about her mother, and she often uses womb imagery to associate with the maternal.

In stanza 4 of the second half of the poem, the image of her mind as a □mental lake,□ into which she can dive and swim through the emotions of fear and love, is striking. She carries the image to the bottom of the lake, which is so deep that it goes all the way to the middle of the earth, where she passes through to the other side of the world. Valentine loves movies that are dreamlike and heavy with symbolism, and this admiration is reflected in her poetic style. According to Valentine, in an interview with Michael Klein, diving down through the lake is an image that comes from a scene in the 1988 movie *The Navigator*, in which the main character goes down through the earth and comes out in Auckland, New Zealand.

Poetic imagery, as descriptive language, normally appeals to multiple senses. In □Seeing You,□ however, the appeal is to only one sense, that of sight, in keeping with the title of the poem. All the images are things the reader sees with the mind's eye: a mudbank, a boat, a hand, stars, a kite, fingers, a river, sparks, eyes, a lake, and the colors blue, red, and green. The colors appear only in the second stanza, perhaps

signifying how a person grows and blossoms when in love and experiencing new dimensions in life.

Poetic imagery, as figurative language, often uses metaphors to stand for the actual object. In the final stanza of □Seeing You,□ Valentine avoids a graphic description of her lover's private parts by calling his genitalia □Your tree.□ She extends the metaphor to describe the □heavy green sway□ of the tree. She then offers a new metaphor for the same thing by equating the genitalia to a □bright male city.□ Seeing her mother for who she really is, with all her fears and love, equates with the □original garden.□ Seeing her lover in a sexual context becomes a □garden of abundance,□ perhaps signifying the physical and emotional sensations of love that he will bring to her.

Fragments and Caesuras

In an interview with Richard Jackson, Valentine was asked about the fragments upon which her poetry seems to be based. She replied: □These 'fragments' . . . are very often what I sense and feel; they are how I 'get' this time and place and the currents of my private and public life and the lives around me.□ She compares these fragments to newspaper clippings or scenes from a movie. In other words, she uses the fragments like pictures in her mind, flashing images that she grabs and puts together to communicate a whole idea.

Free verse varies line length to control the flow of the thought and emphasize meaning. In □Seeing You,□ few stanzas have lines of equal length, and thoughts are broken between stanzas. Within the lines as well, Valentine may use one or two caesuras, or strong pauses, to break up the thought into fragments or slow down the reading. Caesuras are used to emphasize meaning, such as strong contrasts or close relationships between ideas. For example, a comma is placed between □four stars□ and □like a kite,□ which might get the reader to place the image of the four stars firmly in the mind before going on to connect those four stars into a kite shape. Furthermore, there is a difference of emphasis and meaning between □I could see your brilliance magnified□ and what Valentine wrote, □I could see you, brilliance magnified.□ Valentine's way makes the brilliance more outstanding and equates brilliance with the mother as if it were her whole being and not just a quality she possesses. Valentine's caesuras, therefore, are a result of the fragmented nature of her imagination.

Historical Context

Feminist poetry is not the same thing as poetry written by women. Women often write poetry in traditional and formulaic ways. However, a distinctive kind of poetry is feminist poetry, born out of the women's movement in the 1970s and coming to maturity in the following decade, 1980-1990. Feminist poetry bears a resemblance to the antiwar poetry and some of the beat poetry of the 1960s in its consciousness-raising and political goals. What distinguishes feminist poetry is its experimentation with the function of language in poetry and its themes and imagery based on the unique experiences of women. These two characteristics are evident in □Seeing You,□ when Valentine employs free verse, with her trademark fragments, combined with the imagery of a woman's relationship with her mother and her lover.

Furthermore, feminist poetry has both subjective and collective stories to tell. While the poem may be or seem to be about the poet's private life, it is at the same time intended to express the experiences of many women. The worldview is no longer strictly male but has a female perspective. Valentine, as a rule, does not use herself literally; her narrator is not necessarily herself but one who is meant to draw upon the personal feelings and experiences of the reader. Thus, the poetry remains personal in its ability to capture each reader's intimate thoughts and portray universal experiences. This revealing of the personal and intimate has upset many mainstream American poets and critics, who find such revelations embarrassing and inappropriate. The American Academy of Poets gave its prestigious Lamont Prize in 1990 to Minnie Bruce Pratt, known for her explicitly personal poetry, yet reportedly there was some uneasiness with her work. Thus, feminist poetry has remained somewhat outside the American poetry establishment while nonetheless garnering a supportive audience among readers and critics.

Exceptions to the separation of feminist poetry and the mainstream have been the careers of Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath, perhaps because of the impact of their outspoken literary criticism. Rich is one of Valentine's closest friends and influences, and Valentine's work has been compared to Plath's. It could be said that feminist poetry runs alongside the mainstream in that it has been stripping language and form to its rawest elements to express the previously hidden and secret lives of women, including their views on sexuality, since the 1970s. In various interviews, Valentine has indicated that she wants to get past the secrets and the myths to the truths of women's lives. She achieves this goal in the sexual intimacy, the fears, and the emotions of loves that she describes in □Seeing You.□ Another theme that recurs in interviews with Valentine is her admiration of women political poets and their efforts to speak out on issues that matter. As long as there is oppression based on gender and an elitism in poetry that prefers personal and political detachment, there will be a place for feminist poets such as Valentine.

Critical Overview

Because □Seeing You□ has been published twice in book-length collections by Valentine, it is appropriate to look at the critical reaction to both books. *The River at Wolf* was called □daring□ in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, which goes on to state that the poems □succeed by not giving in to melodrama or sentimentality; they focus on details of great clarity.□ The reviewer for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* adds that many of the poems, such as □Seeing You,□ □repeat lines, with a resonant echoing effect,□ observing that □occasionally the repetition drowns out the poem, and sometimes the resistance to the maudlin is so great that the narration sounds harsh.□ The poet David Rivard, in a critique of *The River at Wolf* for *Ploughshares*, says that Valentine □faces head-on the most serious mysteries of desire and death.□ Rivard describes the poems in this volume as □intense, calligraphic lyricism,□ □epics of the inner life,□ and □militantly non-narrative.□

The awarding of the National Book Award to Valentine for *Door in the Mountain* was for many readers, among them Barbara Hoffert writing for the *Library Journal*, an affirmation that Valentine is □one of the best [poets] at work in America today.□ Hoffert finds Valentine's work □beautifully precise□as in music, there's as much here in the silence as there is in the sound□and radiant with the pain of being in the world.□ The critic John Freeman, in the *Seattle Times*, writes that Valentine displays □a sensibility unlike any other in American letters□ and that her style □gives the reader a chance to indulge a heightened awareness in the natural world, the passage of time and the aural quality of language.□

In general, critics praise Valentine for a unique talent, although some complain that her dreamlike images wander into the inexplicable. Nonetheless, the number of her awards, the admiration of fellow poets, and the longevity of her career testify to the quality of her poetry and the value to be found in studying it.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Lois Kerschen is a school district administrator and freelance writer. In this essay, she discusses understanding a Valentine poem through a knowledge of her methods and influences.

Poetry is often a part of English class that students dread, because they do not have a clue about how to read a poem or what it means. For the general reading public, the problem is much the same. Learning the elements of poetry and having an ear for the sounds of language that are so important to the genre will help a reader understand a poem. It also helps to know something about the poet, influences on the poet, and the characteristic style of the poet. Certainly, in the case of poetry by Valentine, it is useful to understand something about her mental process and intentions as she writes. Interviews with Valentine herself and analysis by experts who know her work provide this information.

Readers might be in the best position to understand a Valentine poem if they bring to mind how they feel during a dream or when just waking from a dream. It is from this viewpoint of dream logic that a Valentine poem makes the most sense. □Seeing You□ first appeared in the collection *The River at Wolf*, published in 1992. In an article for *Poetry* magazine that reviewed that book, Steven Cramer comments: □A poem by Jean Valentine travels in two directions□inward toward the recesses of self and outward toward the reaches of otherness□via a single route: the dream.□ For Valentine, Cramer surmises, dreams provide not only insight but also revelation. Indeed, in an interview with Michael Klein in 1991, the year after the first publication of □Seeing You□ in the *American Poetry Review*, Valentine says, □I feel more and more as if my poems are almost all from dreams, or written as if from dreams.□ She adds that the way □another poet might write from an outward experience is the same way that I would write from a dream.□

In a review of *Door in the Mountain* (2004), which also contains □Seeing You,□ the poet and Rutgers University professor Alicia Ostriker, writing for *American Book Review*, describes Valentine's dream poems as □poems of profound imagination, delicate and sensual, fearless and magical,□ much like those of John Keats and Wallace Stevens. Ostriker quotes Valentine's fellow poet and close friend Adrienne Rich as saying that delving into a Valentine poem:

is like looking into a lake: you can see your own outline, and the shapes of the upper world, reflected among rocks, underwater life, glint of lost bottles, drifted leaves. The known and familiar become one with the mysterious and half-wild, at the place where consciousness and the subliminal meet. . . . It lets us into spaces and meanings we couldn't approach in any other way.

This description from Rich is especially helpful when reading □Seeing You,□ since this poem actually uses the imagery not only of looking into a lake but also of diving into one's mental lake of fear and love and finding brilliance at the bottom. To use Rich's

description, the known and familiar emotions of fear and love become one with the mysterious brilliance at the bottom. The conscious and subliminal, or what is below consciousness, meet in the person of the lover. This meeting of two parts of the mind defies □rationality in ways that help us break through to another dimension of the real,□ concludes Ostriker.

The critic Carol Muske, writing in the *Nation*, feels that readers should recognize this new dimension from their own dreams as one in which □there are no unessential details□everything is given equal moral and aesthetic weight.□ Cramer adds that Valentine's □compact lyrics inhabit the *thought* of the unconscious . . . hard-edged in detail but elusive in total effect. . . . as if the poet were simply taking notes.□ Ostriker agrees when she notes that Valentine writes with □an impulse toward the ardently and intensely chaste,□ in an austere and cryptic style in which □poems strike like the arrows of a Zen archer.□ H. Susskind, writing for *Choice*, says that Valentine's bone-sharp accuracy of detail is often combined with the personal. This combination results in □images enough to conjure up like memories for her readers,□ because, though her message may be elusive, her images are down to earth. That is the effect that Valentine herself says she seeks. In an interview with Richard Jackson for *Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets*, she says that the voices or narrators are not autobiographical. Rather, she is □trying to move into an other, into others; to move out of the private self into an imagination of everyone's history, into the public world.□ To Klein, she says that □our dreams are universal; our emotional and spiritual life is universal. Because of that, it's just as much a communication, from one person to another, as if you were describing a landscape.□

Susskind notes in his review of *The River at Wolf* that Valentine's □skill is in the manner in which she touches on passion without giving everything away.□ Klein, too, makes note of this element and tells Valentine in his interview with her that what makes her poems so luminous to him is that he does not □miss not having the whole story.□ He appreciates that the sparseness of her language creates poems of □essences□ that give the reader the sense that nothing is missing from them, because the essence becomes the reader's own history. The process allows the reader to live his or her own life subconsciously in the poem. The idea is that the essence draws out the reader's personal history, communicates a connection to the world as a whole, and results in an examination of the reader's subconscious.

Since she is working with the unconscious or subconscious, Valentine says that she often writes poems that she herself does not understand, so she has to rely on the sound of the language to judge the success of the poem. If she thinks it sounds good, it does not matter to her that she does not understand it. However, if her friends do not understand it either, to the point of not liking it, she reworks the poem or discards it. If her friends do not understand it but like it anyway, then she trusts that she has written a poem of value, something deep and alive, like the poetry of Emily Dickinson or Elizabeth Bishop, whose poetry Valentine admires because it makes her feel as if she could always go deeper.

All of this complexity can make a poem quite mysterious. However, Valentine has no objection to mystery. In fact, Klein asks Valentine in his interview, "How much do you feel you have to give readers in order for them to understand what you are saying?" She replies, "I think I do everything I can to be understood but after a point there's nothing more I can do." Rather than lose the poetic qualities of the work, Valentine says she "would hold out for mystery. . . . I don't have any liking at all for obscurity, but I do love mystery."

Muske thinks that Valentine manages to communicate in what appears to be an overly cryptic and mysterious style because "her mastery of the form, the deep image" enables the words to expand and become rich with meaning. It is, therefore, a style that requires being able to read between the lines, where so much seems to be stored. Valentine writes about the invisible, so the white spaces signify the unspoken and the unseen. Lee Upton, in *The Muse of Abandonment*, interprets Valentine's white spaces as creating "tenuous psychological states" through the appearance of the poem floating in the white spaces "as if about to be lifted from the page. . . . lightening and diffusing her sense of corporeality, rendering an ethereal poetry that revolts against the materiality of the body and the text and their combined gravity."

This ethereal nature may be attributed to the influence of the spiritual in Valentine's life and beliefs. A religious person, Valentine devotes time to prayer and meditation. Naturally, then, there is a sense in her poetry of a curiosity about God and another world. In her interview with Michael Klein, she says, "I feel that all poetry is prayer, it's just as simple as that. Who else would we be talking to?" Valentine adds later in the interview that "the cry of the heart of modern poetry, for the most part, is more like prayer." Perhaps that is because Valentine sees prose as where one learns history, that is to say, the what and how of life, while poetry, she thinks, tries to give meaning to life. This element of the spiritual relates to the dreams that influence her poetry in that they are both dimensions which are not rational. Both work with the unseen but emotionally undeniable.

The advice students do not want to hear is that the best way to understand poetry is to read lots of poetry. When trying to understand the works of one poet in particular, such as Valentine, it is valuable to read a number of her works. How else could one know if a particular poem, "Seeing You," for instance, is a continuation of typical themes for Valentine or is a departure into a new message or structure? It is also very helpful to read other poets who have influenced her writing or to whose work her own works are similar.

Valentine is often compared to Louise Bogan, an American poet who is considered one of the best critics of poetry in the mid-twentieth century. Bogan's lyrics are also brief and limited mostly to two themes for which Valentine is noted: love and grief. Bogan's two favorite poets are also favorites of Valentine's: William Butler Yeats of Ireland and Rainer Maria Rilke of Germany. Yeats is also skilled at finding imagery that would fix a moment of experience in the memory, and Valentine's works are quite similar to Rilke's, in that his poetry also conveys a sense of something hidden and beyond, of a reality that escapes us just as it is grasped at, of mystery and the mystical.

Valentine is called a poet's poet. That is a title that is also given to Bogan and to Elizabeth Bishop, with whom Valentine identifies closely. Bishop, too, has a talent for small poetic structures and descriptive detail, using sharp-edged language and images that are precise and true to life. The same could be said of Emily Dickinson, who quickly comes to mind when reading Valentine. In fact, Valentine has said that Dickinson is in her blood. Consequently, when studying a particular poem, reading more poetry by the same author and by others opens up the mind and adds colors to the literary palette to a point that not only makes interpretation easier but also makes poetry more enjoyable. It is an investment of time that will pay dividends in the delight that language can bring and the tremendous breadth of the world that poetic expression opens.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on □Seeing You,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Jennifer Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature and is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she explores water imagery in Seeing You.

Valentine's use of water imagery in □Seeing You□ provides continuity and meaning to the poet's reflections on love. With water imagery, she taps into a tradition that has been sustained throughout literature. As far back as Homer's *Odyssey*, readers find water as symbolic of movement, possibility, danger, and journeying. Mark Twain used the river in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to stand for the journey of life, where one encounters things that can be controlled and others that cannot. The deep, mysterious ocean in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* represents danger, fate, and the unknown. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, water imagery symbolizes continuity and calm in contrast to the chaos and superficiality of the lives of his characters. These are just a few well-known examples of water imagery, but the incidence of its use throughout world literature attests to its rich symbolic possibilities. The analytical psychologist Carl Jung also recognized the importance of water imagery and employed it to symbolize the unconscious, both personal and collective. Jung saw water as representative of the life cycle.

In this highly visual poem, Valentine incorporates numerous layers of literary symbolism and psychological exploration in her use of water imagery. In the first section of the poem, the speaker addresses her mother and comments on the love they shared. She writes that she was □born under the mudbank,□ which describes a place that contains water but is only in proximity to an entire body of water. It is murky and a bit shapeless. It actually represents a mix of earth and water. These are the conditions in which the speaker entered the world, and the reader recognizes the presence of water as an element not yet defined. Readers may also note that water is often associated with the womb and birth, so this seems a fitting introduction to Valentine's poem. In the second line, the speaker recalls to her mother, □you gave me your boat.□ Her mother gave her the ability to go forth into the water safely and navigate it. Here, Valentine uses the water to symbolize life experiences and venturing into the world. It also points to the mother's sacrifice. That the mother made the speaker feel safe is expressed in line 4: □I made my home in your hand.□

Valentine first introduces the idea of water as only one of four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. Many writers and thinkers also characterize air as wind or sky. The idea of the four elements was first held by the ancient Greeks but continues to be held by modern thinkers. In line 6, the speaker says that her mother's hand is made of □four stars, like a kite.□ These two references are to the air (or sky) and bring in a sense of contrast to the water. The speaker's emotional maturity and gradual loss of innocence are expressed in line 7, when the speaker recalls that her mother was □afraid, afraid, afraid, afraid□ and that she tried to give her mother some temporary comfort from the fear. The two are taking care of each other against a background of fear; first, the mother gave her daughter the boat to make her feel safe in the water, and then the

daughter tries to remove the mother's relentless fear. Another element arrives in line 10: □Out of the river sparks rose up.□ Fire imagery provides contrast in the form of an unexpected burst of sparks from the water, signaling change.

The next two lines describe the mother's reaction to the change. She has both fear and love, and the speaker recalls seeing her □brilliance magnified.□ This is a subtle reinforcement of the importance of water in the mother-daughter relationship. The speaker sees her mother's brilliance magnified, as if in a drop of water or as a reflection of bright light on still water. The section ends with the speaker telling her mother that seeing her was the □original garden,□ her first experience of a love relationship.

The second section deals with a romantic love, and the speaker addresses a lover. Like the mother, the lover has an empty hand made of □four stars, like a kite.□ This repeated imagery relates the two loves in the speaker's mind. She sees something familiar in the lover that she recalls from her mother, and it makes her feel comfortable enough to go forward with the relationship. It also reinforces the use of the air element as a balance to the recurring water imagery. But here the empty hand does not symbolize fear and neediness. The lover's empty hand is a place where the speaker can simply stand and feel blessed and enjoy gazing into her lover's eyes. Where her mother kept fear in her □finger-spaces,□ the lover has blue, the color of water, in his. Water in this poem represents love, possibility, and growth; Valentine invokes water imagery surrounding the empty hand of the lover to create a thematically consistent picture. Blue is also the color of the sky, which has been present in both the mother's and the lover's hands. When she says, □my eyes' light in / your eyes' light□ (lines 18 and 19), the speaker is expressing her sense of love and her belonging in the □blue finger-spaces□ (line 18). Line 20 takes the significance of water a step further: □we drank each other in.□ Valentine uses the fact that water is quenching and life-sustaining to illustrate the mutual love the speaker shares with her lover.

The speaker symbolically abandons the boat her mother gave her when she decides, in line 21, to immerse herself fully in the water and seek its depths. She writes, □I dove down my mental lake fear and love: / first fear then under it love.□ Feeling safe and fulfilled by romantic love, she finds herself anxious to see what is at the bottom of her lake. She is not just curious; she also feels empowered and capable of asserting her will to see what her mental lake holds. The lake is herself, her abilities, and her purpose. Although she first encounters fear (which is not at all surprising, given what she described in the first section), she faces the fear to see what is past it. There she finds love. Valentine suggests that fear is motivated by love. A mother's fear for her children is generally driven by her love for them and desire for them to be happy and safe. In romantic love, people are often fearful of having their hearts broken. When the speaker discovers this fear within herself, she is really discovering something about human nature in general.

The speaker's decision to dive into the water is rewarded when she finds her lover at the bottom of her lake. The unknown has become known, and it is safe and trustworthy. She depicts her lover as □brilliance□ (line 24), just as she had described her mother. Having experienced her journey through the water, she can trust her lover. In line 26,

Valentine brings back the earth element: □Then past the middle of the earth it got light again.□ This is the first time in the poem she refers to earth as its own element; early in the poem she referred to the mudbank of her birth, but the mud was a blend of water and earth. In line 26, late in the poem, earth is an element unto itself. She has gone past the water in her journey and into the earth, seemingly without fear, and she finds light at the end of the journey. She has embraced herself and love, and her courage has been rewarded with peace and security. The poem ends with her characterizing her lover as □the garden of abundance□ (line 28). Where her mother was the □original garden,□ the first love, the lover is abundant love.

In drenching □Seeing You□ in water imagery, Valentine joins a rich literary tradition that reaches back to the beginnings of literary expression. Water is such an integral part of the human experience that it is readily understood and valued by readers. Valentine uses water to represent possibility, reflection, commonality, uncertainty, and movement. She also uses water to demonstrate the contrasts of life and death, peace and turmoil. By combining the universality of water imagery with the universal themes of familial and romantic loves, Valentine offers readers a poem that is both complex and relevant.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on □Seeing You,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Joyce Hart is a published author and former writing instructor. In this essay, she takes the poet's advice to feel the poem rather than to figure out its meaning.

In several interviews, Valentine, author of the poem □Seeing You,□ has stated that the point of writing or of reading poetry is not to be able to explain it but rather to feel it. Valentine has said that there are many times when she herself does not know precisely what her poems are about. She senses the emotions behind them, however, and hopes that she is able to transfer these emotions to her audience. With this idea is mind, this essay investigates the emotions behind □Seeing You.□

People who have studied creativity, whether they are artists involved in the process or theorists interested in the topic, talk about the flow of the creative process. Metaphors used to explain this flow include rivers or beams of light or forces of energy. The artist, whether working with words, clay, or paint, thus becomes the vehicle through which this creativity flows. The artist must be open, focused, disciplined, and experienced in a particular medium. With these skills in place, the artist is equipped and ready to accept creative inspiration. Artists trust this flow of inspiration to bring new ideas to the imagination. Because artists have trained themselves in a medium, they are capable of interpreting the creative thoughts and transposing them into their chosen art forms. This may be what Valentine is referring to. She opens herself to the flow of creativity, which enlightens her as to how to express a feeling she has. She translates the energy that flows through her into words that create images that she and her readers can grasp. Artists such as Valentine are so open to and trusting of this flow of creative thoughts that they do not unduly censor it with rational thinking. She implies that she does not try to make these creative thoughts fit into a presubscribed language. Valentine does not stop the flow of words to ask what the words mean. Rather, she accepts the words, because they create a vessel into which she can pour her feelings.

Looking more specifically at the poem □Seeing You,□ readers will note that the first section of the poem is focused on the word □mother.□ It would not be taking too much liberty here to assume that the poet is thinking of her own mother. The words that flow from the concept □mother□ must represent, according to the poet's own description of her writing, her feelings (or at least some feelings) that she has concerning her mother. The title of the poem provides the sense that the speaker is looking at her mother from the distance of time, as if she is trying to understand her relationship with her mother; from this distance, she is finally □seeing□ her.

The speaker conveys these feelings through abstract concepts. She uses a metaphoric language that offers images that the reader can interpret through his or her personal experience. For example, in the first stanza, the speaker refers to having been born □under the mudbank.□ What feeling does this convey? This birth can be felt in a variety of ways. To be born under a mudbank might be suffocating. How could anyone breathe under a mudbank? But, then, no one breathes while in the womb. It is possible that the slimy feel of mud is one that the speaker relates to the slimy feel of uterine fluids that

surround an unborn child. □Mudbank□ could also make one think of a primordial field of creation, from which much of life has evolved.

After mentioning this birth in the mudbank, the poet then writes that her mother gives her a boat. A boat can be looked upon as a vessel. It is not necessary to decipher whether this is a metaphor for the mother's womb. The feeling behind the phrase is that this child who was born under a mudbank has, in some way, been rescued and protected. The boat presents itself as a safety zone, something that lifts the child out of the suffocating mud and carries it.

The speaker of this poem then switches the metaphor. The mother, who was at first seen as a boat, is now referred to as a hand. These images are not so different from each other. A cupped hand looks much like the bowed hull of a boat. The hand also works in much the same way as a boat, at least in this poem. This child, who was the speaker at one time, was carried in both the boat and the hand. The feeling between the two metaphors is therefore somewhat similar up to this point; the only difference might be a sense of perspective. A boat is something large that floats on water; a hand is much smaller and more personal. Being carried in the mother's hand as opposed to having been given the mother's boat brings a sensation of warmth to the poem, at least momentarily. In the next stanza, this feeling changes.

The mother's hand is empty, the speaker states, and it is made □like a kite.□ Whereas the image of a hand suggests warmth, the kite, with its angular points and inanimate and somewhat flimsy construction, offers no such warmth. It is airy and, like the boat, is removed from the child. The speaker may have felt cuddled by the mother at one point, but this was only a transitional period. So far we have been told that the child was saved by the mother's boat and lived a long time in her hand, but then that hand became kitelike and empty. This transition of feelings is better explored with reference to the following stanza, in which the speaker informs her readers that the mother was filled with fear. The speaker does not state the source of the mother's fear, but she uses a metaphor to explain how her mother's fear affected her: □I licked it from your finger-spaces / and wanted to die.□ This could easily be the strongest emotion of the poem. The mother's fear was fed to the child, who became, literally, scared to death by it.

The speaker mentions love, a few lines later, but she couples it with this fear. □I could see you, your fear and your love.□ This is not a comfortable feeling. There is confusion here. Fear makes the speaker think of death, but love draws her in despite the terror. And this, the speaker declares, □was the original garden.□ In other words, the sense at this point of the poem is that these were the feelings that helped to sculpt the person the speaker would become.

The second section of the poem is titled □Lover.□ The speaker appears to use the previous section of the poem to provide her first, or original, experiences and definitions of love: from whom she gained it, what it meant to her, and how it felt. In the second section, the speaker refers to a time when she is grown up and has found a lover. How have her feelings about love changed? How do they remain the same?

The speaker begins the second section almost in the same way that she began the first. She is not born of this lover, but there is a similar feeling that she experiences. Like the mother, the lover has an empty hand that is also made like a kite, but the speaker's experience with that empty hand feels so much healthier. She does not lick fear from the lover's fingers as she had with her mother's fingers. Rather, for some unspoken reason, she feels blessed for having been offered this empty hand. She states, □I stood my fingers / in your blue finger-spaces.□ Sucking from the mother's fingers brings the notion of the mother's having given nourishment to the child, but that nourishment was tainted. The mother was, in some way, superior to the child, who was dependent on her, and her love was polluted with fear. In the speaker's adult relationship with a lover, she is an equal. She does not put her mouth to the lover's fingers but rather places her own fingers there. Her fingers fit with the lover's, intertwining where the fingers are not (in the spaces between). This feels so much more like a healthy relationship compared with the one with the mother. The poet expands on this feeling of equality when she writes □my eyes' light in / your eyes' light, / we drank each other in.□

The remaining stanzas of the poem feel equally more healthy, as the speaker dives past the fear that she had inherited from her relationship with her mother and finds the love, the □brilliance, at the bottom.□ Without even knowing the meanings for the □mental lake,□ the □last red inside place,□ the □middle of the earth,□ and the many other metaphors that the poet uses to conclude her poem, readers can feel the changes in the speaker□her happiness, her exaltation□that come about from having seen, and felt, the other side of love.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on □Seeing You,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

A thirty-minute VHS video is available from the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives at www.sfsu.edu, showing Valentine reading her poetry at San Francisco State University on November 29, 1979.

A thirty-one-minute VHS video is available from the Poetry Center and American Poetry Archives at www.sfsu.edu, showing Valentine reading from *Home Deep Blue* and *Growing Darkness, Growing Light* at San Francisco State University on October 15, 1997.

A 1989 audiotape of *The Resurrected*, produced by Watershed, is available from the Writer's Center of Bethesda, Maryland, at www.writer.org/index.asp.

A number of Valentine's poems are available in audio form on her official website: www.jeanvalentine.com.

Topics for Further Study

Valentine considers her fellow poets Fanny Howe, Jane Cooper, Sharon Olds, C. D. Wright, and Adrienne Rich to be her friends and models. Write a brief biography for each of these American women, including a capsule description of her work. Summarize your research with a comparison of these poets.

Valentine's *Door in the Mountain* is a collection of all of her previous publications as well as several new poems. Investigate this practice of reprinting previously published works that is so common among poets. Why are previous collections □recycled□? Write a report on the answer, which should be an insight into the publishing industry and the reading public. Information relating to this topic may be found in the introductions to the collections of various poets.

Valentine has spent most of her life as a college professor. Check on the professions of a number of other famous modern writers in the fields of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction and list them. Are most or many involved in teaching? If so, conduct a discussion with a group of your classmates about why you think that is or is not the case.

□Seeing You□ is a poem that describes the poet's mother as being afraid. Why do you think she is afraid? What are the fears that all mothers (and fathers) share? Write a composition on this subject, perhaps interviewing various parents about their challenges and feelings.

Valentine has spent most of her life in the New York City area, which is the publishing center of the United States. Investigate the publishing industry, including publishing houses, agents, and authors. List some of the major publishing houses located in New York City and comment in a group discussion on why you think so many are in New York City or close to each other.

Valentine is often compared to Emily Dickinson and Louise Bogan. Choose one of these two poets and then write a paragraph identifying her followed by a paragraph comparing her work to that of Valentine.

Compare and Contrast

1990: As their children's protectors and teachers, parents are encouraged to focus on building their children's self-esteem. Parents are challenged to teach their children how to handle such modern issues as body image, drug and alcohol abuse, peer pressure, crime, and rapidly changing technology. Many parents regard the world as an unfriendly place for their children, and they struggle with fear for them. Friends are often a stronger influence over children than their parents are.

Today: Parents are still encouraged to build their children's self-esteem, but new challenges make this task increasingly difficult. Violence among children is on the rise, and the consequences are more serious than ever. Technology can represent as much danger as benefit to children, and parents must be vigilant in monitoring Internet and cell-phone activity. Childhood obesity and eating disorders pose unique early challenges to self-esteem. Friends continue to be extremely influential in children's lives, forcing mothers and fathers to work harder to be effective in their parenting. As the issues facing children become more difficult and more serious, parents often find themselves fearful as they strive to protect their children.

1990: Most of the well-known women literary writers are novelists, such as Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, and Margaret Atwood. The poetry of such popular writers as Maya Angelou is gaining widespread exposure. A woman has not won the Nobel Prize in Literature since 1966 (Nelly Sachs) but has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry as recently as 1987 (Rita Dove).

Today: Most of the popular women writers are still novelists, many of whom have proved their staying power. Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, and Margaret Atwood continue to enjoy a large readership, as do newer writers, such as Anita Shreve. Women are capturing more elite literary awards. Four women have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in the past fifteen years (Nadine Gortimer, Toni Morrison, Wislawa Szymborska, and Elfriede Jelinek) and four have earned the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (Mona Van Duyn, Louise Gluck, Jorie Graham, and Lisel Mueller).

1990: American poetry is generally personal in nature. Poets tend to use poetry to express political opinions (especially at poetry slams, where poets perform their work before audiences in competition) or as a way to relate their personal experiences. Some scholars have reached the conclusion that American poetry has become too academic and is written more for a small segment of the publishing industry than for the general public. Despite these claims that poetry is marginalized among American readers, creative writing programs and workshops have become increasingly popular and well attended.

Today: American poetry is still characterized by personal expression. Many poets still use poetry as a way to express opinions about politics and social issues. Poetry slams have declined in popularity, although organized slams are still held all over the country. The public's interest in poetry continues to decline; in 2002, only 12 percent of American

adults read poetry. This figure is almost one-fourth of the number of people who read novels and short fiction.

What Do I Read Next?

At the age of seventy-five, Jane Cooper, who befriended Valentine when her first book came out, published *The Flashboat: Poems Collected and Reclaimed* (2000), a complete collection of her work, which is known mostly for its insightful and compassionate political views.

Valentine is an admirer of Fanny Howe, whose *On the Ground: Poems* (2004) is a set of short sequences that reflect her intense interest in politics and social justice and express her belief that love can light the way.

Sharon Olds, whose collection of her best poems from seven other books was published in 2004 as *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems, 1980-2002*, is another poet whom Valentine admires. Olds has a style that connects immediately with audiences, making her one of the most widely read of modern poets.

Adrienne Rich, who is an icon of feminist poets and a close friend of Valentine's, coedited *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose* (1993) with Albert and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi.

Showing a style akin to Emily Dickinson's, Valentine's *Home Deep Blue: New and Selected Poems* (1989) is a collection of lyrical verse that displays her strength in the use of language and sound.

Valentine's eighth book, *The Cradle of the Real Life* (2000), has a long sequence merging Irish and feminist themes as well as poems of Valentine's usual trademark brevity.

Valentine enjoys reading the poetry of the southern-born poet C. D. Wright, whose tenth book, *Steal Away: Selected and New Poems* (2003), exhibits enticing and diverse multicultural subjects and experimental forms.

The Extraordinary Tide: New Poetry by American Women (2001), edited by Susan Alzenberg, Erin Belieu, and Jeremy Countryman, is an anthology of 400 poems by 118 female American poets, including 7 by Valentine.

Further Study

Howe, Florence, ed., *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets*, Perennial, 1993.

Originally published in 1973, this book is an important collection of women's poetry that portrays the themes of individual identity and roles in society as women have asked for justice and nonviolence across the decades.

Middlebrook, Diane Wood, and Marilyn Yalom, eds., *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century*, University of Michigan Press, 1985.

The Center for Research on Women at Stanford University collected sixteen essays for this book on the relationship of the American literary tradition and women poets. The volume includes bibliographies.

Rankine, Claudia, and Julia Spahr, eds., *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

This volume explores the influence of gender on contemporary poetry with statements on aesthetics and identity by the ten featured poets. The book includes a critical essay on each poet and a bibliography of works.

Zook, Amy Jo, and Wauneta Hackleman, eds., *The Study and Writing of Poetry by American Women Poets*, 2nd rev. ed., Whitston Publishing Company, 1996.

Designed for high school and college students, this handbook provides explanations by fifty contemporary American women poets about the techniques used in writing poetry.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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